

Making School Safe: What exactly are employees required to do? ... allowed to do?

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(NOTE: This is a model in-service training handout and will need to be adapted for each school district. The specifics below, in other words, including that teachers cannot be fired for coming out to their classes, are true for the district for which this was originally developed, but may not be true for yours.)

School District _____ faculty, staff, and administration are responsible for providing equal access to educational opportunity for all students, and fair and equal treatment of all students, regardless of students' actual or perceived sexual orientation. All students are entitled to protection from harm, including harassment, at school.

Many students are affected by this issue -- some are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (gltb) themselves, or suspect they may be; some have a parent, sibling, or other relative or close family friend who is; and all live in a pluralistic, democratic society in which it is crucial to be able to get along with people in all of the above categories, whether or not you agree with them.

Below, two lists that clarify actions that district employees are **required** to take, and those that district employees are **allowed** to take (that is, the district will support all of the "allowed" actions).

Required of educators:

- Intervene immediately to stop any harassment, intimidation, violence, or threat of violence against a student (e.g., persistent name-calling; note or graffiti reading "Die Homo"; pushing in hallways).
- Do not tell nor allow students to tell "gay jokes" (including stereotyped references to florists, hairdressers, prison, or dropping soap in a shower) or use affected voices or mannerisms as a "gay joke" (e.g., lispng voices, limp wrists). Do not tease students about sexual orientation (e.g., a smirking "Where's your boyfriend?" to a male student usually seen in his best friend's company).
- Interrupt student name-calling (e.g., "faggot," "dyke"), "gay jokes" or inappropriate categorical pronouncements (e.g., "Gays are disgusting and are going to burn in hell," "Lesbians are just too ugly to get men," "Bisexuals spread AIDS") just as you would intervene in student use of similar slurs based on other aspects of a student's identity or presumed identity (see Nondiscrimination Policy). This also applies to the use of otherwise-appropriate words in a derogatory manner (e.g., "Lesbian!" or "That's so gay!" as insults).
- Follow usual classroom procedure, and school and district policy, to determine appropriate disciplinary actions.
- If a student complains to you of mistreatment or harassment by another student or district employee, follow school and district policy for reporting such incidents.
- Refrain from extended or frequent commentary to students on your personal beliefs regarding sexual orientation, regardless of the nature of these views.
- Stick to facts in discussing issues related to sexual orientation. For example, it is a fact that while teens' feelings of same-sex attraction may or may not continue into adulthood, teens who feel certain that they are homosexual or bisexual are probably correct -- just as teens who feel certain that they are heterosexual are probably correct. Acknowledge controversy where it exists ("*The question of whether same-sex couples will be legally allowed to marry is being fought in courts and elections nationwide*"). Use correct terminology (e.g., distinguish between homosexuality and transvestism). Model a rational, non-inflammatory response to these issues.
- Correct students' language when they make legitimate comments in a classroom discussion, but use a slur instead of appropriate language (e.g., "I think fags shouldn't be allowed to get married"), Possible responses: "That's an insulting term. Use the right word to say what you mean." (If the student doesn't know an appropriate word, supply it - or ask the class to.) "You know that's not a respectful word. Try again with civil language." or "That's not an okay word - it's an insult, and it's not allowed here. And, it distracts from your point. Now, what WAS your point?"



Allowed of educators:

Some faculty and staff have expressed concern that they will be reprimanded for actions which are allowable. In fact, employees may:

- Use age-appropriate materials (books, pamphlets, articles, videos, posters, etc.) related to the topic of sexual orientation. Display stickers and posters advocating tolerance and/or providing referral numbers.
- Refer to and/or discuss the sexual orientation of authors, fictional characters, or historical figures, incidentally or, especially, when it is particularly relevant to the study of their work or actions. Include glbt issues when covering current news, the history of social justice movements, family life, and other related curriculum areas.
- Choose to "come out" to students regarding your own sexual orientation, or choose not to do so. If you do so, you are specifically protected from any employment discrimination by [the local union] contract and [in our case, City] law.
- Listen and talk supportively to students who "come out" to you, or who tell you they are questioning their sexual orientation.
- Inform students of resources available to them and their families, including [list of local resources & phone numbers, including GLSEN, PFLAG, GLBTQ youth group].
- Mention the fact that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people exist in our society, including the local community.
- Refrain from making statements that imply that everyone present is, or will grow up to be, heterosexual. Instead of *"At your age, all girls are boy-crazy,"* it's easy to substitute inclusive language: *"At your age, people tend to have intense crushes."* Instead of *"No one knows what causes homosexuality,"* try *"No one yet knows for sure just how a person's sexual orientation is determined."* Refrain from making statements that imply that youthful same-sex feelings are "just a phase" -- for some people they are, for others they are not.
- State your own opinions regarding sexual orientation issues. For example: *"I think there are many characteristics of a person which are more important than his or her sexual orientation."* However, it is not acceptable to present these opinions to students as objective facts, nor to sermonize.
- In classes in which it applies to the subject matter, hold class discussions and/or invite guest speakers on the subject of sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or discrimination on these bases. [List local sources for speakers.]
- Facilitate student discussion of these topics such that slurs are not allowed, misinformation is corrected, and derogatory "jokes" are challenged, not ignored or laughed off.
- Take advantage of opportunities for further information and training on this subject. A very good place to start is at the website for the Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network: www.glsen.org/. (Other great web sites: www.pflag.org, www.outproud.org, www.oasismag.com, www.elight.org. The last two are sites by and for glbt youth.) An excellent book for teachers, students, and parents is ***Free Your Mind: The Book for Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual Youth & Their Allies*** by Ellen Bass and Kate Kaufman, HarperPerennial.